Internet Usage & Depressive Tendency among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

These days internet and virtual mode of communication have emerged as an integral part of human life in every aspect- social, professional or personal. Though advent of internet has been marked as the greatest boon to human society; nevertheless, the cons that came along with it cannot be ignored as well. In this regard, the association between internet overuse, social withdrawal, virtual sensation seeking and rising depressive tendencies among present youth have become a matter of relevant concern for mental health professionals. Earlier research evidences suggest existence of a close link between internet usage pattern and tendency to experience depression in people. Observations noted that individuals with depressive tendency tend to find momentary solace in virtual world, in turn developing an unhealthy way of coping. It is a well noted fact that males and females generally differ in their emotional expression, due to their acquired social roles during developing years. But whether they differ in their depressive tendency and engage in internet/ virtual activities as a way to deal life problems, remain an intriguing and somewhat ambiguous question. Therefore, present study purported to find answer to this intriguing ambiguity by examining gender difference in internet usage and depressive tendency among young adults. Further, the study re-explored the connection between internet overuse and depressive tendency in relation to young adult males and females. The association was confirmed and gender difference emerged as a significant factor in this study.

Keywords: *Internet usage, Internet addiction, Depressive tendency, Young adults, Gender difference*

INTRODUCTION

Internet has become an essential part of human life all over the world, and its usage is maximum among the young group of people (Nalwa & Anand, 2003). Considering all the positive effects in our day-to-day lives, be it professional or personal, brought by the virtual communication platforms with help of internet, it has undoubtedly become an integral part of present society. Further, during this present COVID pandemic crisis, when we all are forced to operate mostly online, availing internet facilities have become inevitably essential for us. Earlier studies in this area, highlighted the fact that using internet and communication technologies for work or learning purposes help sustain and increase motivation among individuals (Guan & Subhramanyam, 2009). Research works also claimed that absence of internet usage, these days, could impact the perceived quality of life negatively (Pontes et al., 2014). Though internet has a wide array of perceived merits, still its negative influence physical and psychological health cannot be negated (Greenfield, 2000). The most common concern of present day related to internet usage is its addictive quality; internet addiction (IA) or the compulsive usage of internet/ virtual media has become an area of substantial concern for the mental health experts (Murali & George, 2007; Shapira, Lessig & Goldsmith, 2003). Studies suggest that latent condition of addiction prevailing among people can further be reinforced with frequent use/ overuse of internet, which can give rise to the internet addiction (IA) in them (Charlton & Danforth 2007). In order to understand the condition deeply, and to know

about its comorbid factors, several studies conducted in this area noted a close link between depressive tendency and excessive usage of internet or IA condition (Ha et al. 2006; Kim et al. 2006).

IA has been defined as an uncontrollable urge to use internet/virtual media without much aim or concrete purpose (Young, 1999/ 2004); and IA often can stem from excessive or overuse of internet. The condition of IA, in this sense can be described as a behavioural issue, and people engage into it as the maladaptive way to deal with stresses, anxieties and other related problems of life (Jorgenson, Hsiao & Yen, 2016). Researches on IA, internet overuse and mental health conditions, have revealed that the greater use of internet/ virtual platform is associated with psychosocial concerns such as- feeling of loneliness, depression, low self-esteem, etc. (Lin & Tsai, 2002; Yang, 2001; Armstrong, Phillips & Saling, 2000). Earlier work also indicated that there exist a number of emotional factors in relation to IA addiction and poor mental health among college students and young adult groups; the most common one is the tendency of depression (Kandell, 1998).

Depressive tendency has been defined as the manifestation of deep/ underlying sorrow through behavioural symptoms of insomnia/ hypersomnia, loss of appetite/ overeating, low mood, self-dislike, low esteem/ motivation level, feeling of loneliness/ hopelessness/ irritability, etc. (DSM-IV-TR, 2000). It is one of the major concern of mental health realm in present days, and is termed as the '*common cold of psychiatric conditions*'. It is noteworthy, that many studies have observed that the characteristics linked with depressive tendency like- low esteem/ motivation, fear of rejection, need for approval and self conformation from others, etc., may result in overuse of internet/ virtual platforms (Yang et al., 2005; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Nie, Hillygus & Erbring, 2002).

Henceforth, the association between depressive tendency and internet usage pattern is definitely an intriguing one. Its social implication, which suggest virtual sensation seeking and social withdrawal/ isolation can be caused by excessive usage of internet may contribute to experience of depression among young adults (Yen et al., 2008; Dalbudak et al., 2014). Moreover, the previous researches have explored gender as one of the significant factor in relation to internet usage, IA and depressive tendencies (Morrison & Gore, 2010; Yu-Chun et al., 2008). These studies have examined and reported excessive use of virtual medium among young adults with underlying depressive conditions. However, these researches failed to establish any concrete connection between gender, internet usage and depressive tendency.

In view of these mentioned earlier works, it is evident that there exist a significant relation between internet overuse and depressive condition. Nevertheless, relation between internet usage and depressive tendencies in connection to genders (males and females) remains ambiguous. Therefore, the present study has tried to fill-in this gap, by aiming to examine the gender difference in internet usage pattern and depressive tendencies among young adult males and females. Further, the study purported to re-explore the link between internet usage and depressive tendency among present day youth in specification to their genders (males and females). Thus, the objectives of this work are:

1. To examine the gender difference among young adults, if any, in use of internet and depressive tendency.
2. To explore the association between internet usage and depressive tendencies among young adult males and females.

METHOD

Hypotheses

As per the mentioned objectives in the earlier section, the hypotheses of the present study could be considered as three-fold.

Thus, the hypotheses for this study could be enumerated as follows:

1. There exist a gender (males and females) difference in internet usage among young adults.
2. There exist a gender (males and females) difference in depressive tendency among the young adults under study.
3. There exist a significant relation between internet usage and depressive tendency among young adults.

Participants

The participants of this study consist of 250 young adults of Indian origin. The age of respondents lies between 18 to 25 years. Out of the 250 total participants, out of which 140 are females and 110 are males. Purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants for the study purpose.

Data Collection & Instruments Used

Data was collected from the participants after obtaining their informed consent. The tools used for data collection purpose were the following self-report measures:

- ***Internet Addiction Scale (IAS; Young, 1998)-*** This scale was developed by Dr. Kimberly Young in 1998. It is a 20-item scale, which measures the severity of self-reported compulsive use of the internet for adults and adolescents. Various aspects related to internet addiction, like- presence, severity and dependency to internet could be measured by this scale, among adults. Each statement objectively analyzed along a Likert-scale ranging from 0=less extreme behaviour to 5=most extreme behaviour for each individual item. Maximum possible score was 100.
- ***Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)-*** This scale was developed by Beck et al. (1961) with the objective to calculate emotional, somatic and motivational components and also individuals' depressive level and severity. The questionnaire comprised of 21 questions/ items; each item having four alternatives to measures level of depression. Minimum score ranges from 1 to 10 denoting no depression; whereas, maximum possible score can range over 40 denoting extreme level of depression.

However, these self reports measures used for the study are only to understand the internet usage pattern and existence of depressive tendencies, and the relation between the two in respect to young adult males and females. The present work by any means has not tried to establish any clinical/ diagnostic criteria here; rather it has only focused on exploring the difference and relation in/ between internet usage and depressive tendency among young adults (males and females).

Data Analysis

After collection of data, required statistical methods (t-Test and Pearson's correlation) were employed to analyse and interpret the data.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

Group of young adults, stratified on basis of gender (males and females) were taken as the independent variable; and the internet usage level along with depressive tendency were taken as the dependent variables for the present study. Descriptive (Mean and SD), Inferential (t-Test) and Correlational (Pearson's r) statistical methods were employed to analyse the data and state the findings.

The results obtained, hence, tabulated and summarised as follows:

TABLE 1- Internet usage between young adults, males and females

Internet Usage	N= 250	Mean	SD	Independent t-Test (p- value)	Sig. ($df= 248$)
Males	110	44.12	15.66	2.312	0.022
Females	140	38.99	18.65		

Table 1 showing existence of gender difference in internet usage ($p < 0.05$), where males have scored comparatively higher than their female counterparts (Figure 1). Hypothesis 1 is accepted.

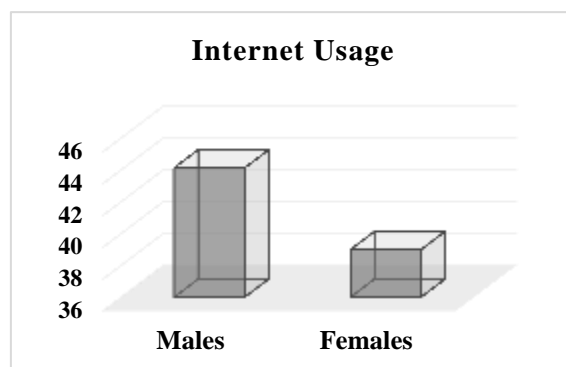**FIGURE 1-** *Internet usage between young adults, males and females*

Internet Usage

TABLE 2- *Depressive tendency between young adults, males and females*

Depressive Tendency	N= 250	Mean	SD	Independent t-Test (*p*- value)	Sig. (*df= 248*)
Males	110	18.63	7.38	4.574	0.000
Females	140	13.84	8.80		

From Table 2 existence of gender difference in depressive tendency ($p < 0.01$) could be observed, where males have scored higher in comparison to the female counterparts (Figure 2). Hypothesis 2 is accepted.

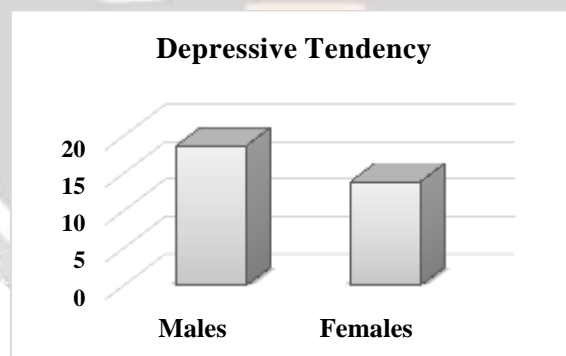**FIGURE 2-** *Depressive tendency between young adults, males and females*

Depressive Tendency

TABLE 3- *Relation between Internet usage and Depressive tendency among Young Adults*

Measure	N	Mean	SD	Pearson's *r*-value	Sig.
Internet Usage	250	41.25	17.55	0.501	0.000
Depressive Tendency	250	15.95	8.53		

From Table 3, existence of an overall positive and significant relation between internet usage and depressive could be observed among the young adults under study ($p < 0.01$). Hypothesis 3, henceforth, is accepted (Figure 3).

Further, as significant gender difference was revealed in terms of internet usage and depressive tendency among young adults, where males scored higher in comparison to their female counterparts; an additional correlation calculation was done to observe the relation between internet usage and depressive tendency for the young adult males under this study condition and the results are reported in Table 4 (given below).

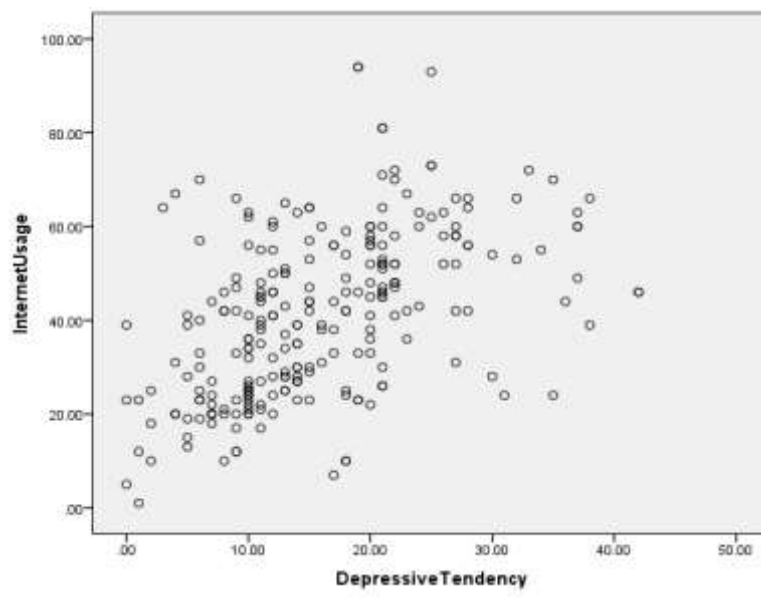<u>*FIGURE 3-*</u> *Overall relation between Internet usage and Depressive tendency among Young Adults*

<u>*TABLE 4-*</u> *Relation between Internet usage and Depressive tendency among Young Males*

Measure	N	Mean	SD	Pearson's *r*-value	Sig.
Internet Usage	110	44.12	15.66	0.632	0.000
Depressive Tendency	110	18.63	7.38		

Table 4 reveals existence of positive significant correlation between internet usage and depressive tendency among young males under study ($p < 0.01$).

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to understand the internet usage pattern and depressive tendency, and to explore the relation between them, among young adults (males and females). A sample of 250 participants of Indian origin, age between 18-25 years, were chosen through purposive sampling, out of which 140 were females and 110 were males. Internet addiction scale (Young, 1998) was used to measure the pattern of internet usage and Beck's depression inventory (Beck et. al., 1961) was administered to assess the depressive tendency among the young adult males and females under study. The results revealed significant higher score on part of young males for both internet usage and depressive tendency in comparison to the females. The data analysis also revealed significant positive relation between excessive internet usage and tendency of depression, and the correlation was found to be stronger in case of young adult males under study.

Studies suggest observation of overuse of internet/ virtual medium to combat latent loneliness and depressive tendencies among people (Jorgenson, Hsiao & Yen, 2016; Lin & Tsai, 2002; Yang, 2001; Armstrong, Phillips & Saling, 2000). It could be assumed that the virtual mode renders people to escape their otherwise unacceptable realities, hence serving as a negative coping strategy. Though virtual escape helps in momentary solace, but it further pushes the person to develop a negative and unhealthy life-style making him/ her experience more boredom, loneliness, hopelessness, etc. Hence, the person more often engages in internet/ virtual activities, establishing a vicious circle of internet overuse and tendency to feel more alone and depressed over time (Yen et al., 2008; Dalbudak et al., 2014). Previous studies (Kraut et al., 2002; McKenna and Bargh, 2000; Nie, Hillygus

& Erbring, 2002) found that the overuse of the internet results in a disruption of the normal life of an individual and the people around him/ her, and is associated with an increased frequency of depressive tendency. Similarly, Kraut et al. (1998) found that greater internet use is associated with loneliness and depressive tendency. Lee & Stapinski (2012), in their study observed that the individuals addicted to internet have considerably low self-esteem and suffer from depressive tendency and tend to be more shy and reclusive in nature. A correlational survey by Kim et al. (2006), revealed that prevalence of internet addiction did not vary with gender but the levels of depressive and suicidal tendency were highest in the internet-addicts' group.

However, in the present study, a gender difference was observed in internet usage pattern and depressive tendency, where males scored significantly higher. Earlier studies, in this domain, found out that males do experience a considerable amount of depression, stress, hopelessness, low esteem and helplessness (Morrison & Gore, 2010; Yu-Chun et al., 2008; Salk, Hyde & Abramson, 2017). But in comparison to females, males are not much expressive about their problems or feelings, which prevent them from seeking social support and help. As the social protocol and masculine gender role stereotyping dictates, males mostly tend to repress their emotions and problems, which might be considered as one of the major reasons for them to excessively use internet/ virtual platforms for escaping their real life problems (Yu-Chun et al., 2008; Pattyn, Verhaeghe & Bracke, 2015; Weiser, 2004; Dufour et al., 2016; Harnaez et al., 2016). On the other hand, females are more comfortable in expressing their problems and better in seeking social support in face of odds (Piccinelli & Wilkinson, 2000; Reevy & Maslach, 2001; Larsen, 2011). Hence, it is not that females does not experience depressive tendencies; but they deal better with it without manifesting internet overuse or falling victim to virtual media trap.

The findings of this study showed that individuals excessively using internet have higher depressive tendency. It could be assumed that depressive tendencies predispose the individual to suffer from the internet overuse. Many people use internet as an alternative to a life without joy, especially for individuals suffering from depressive tendencies. Similarly, depressive tendency may trigger excessive use of internet, it means that people who manifest internet overuse behaviour, experience the negative symptoms that could be closely linked with depressive tendencies.

CONCLUSION

From the data analysis and the discussions, the conclusions inferred could be summarised as follows:

1. Existence of significant difference in internet usage between young adult males and females under study. Hypothesis 1, thus, accepted.
2. Existence of significant difference in depressive tendency among young adult males and females. Hypothesis 2 is accepted.
3. Significant positive correlation exists between internet usage and depressive tendency. Hypothesis 3, hence, accepted.

Limitations and Applicability's

The study was limited to a relatively small group of participants (n = 250) and an undiversified socio-cultural background (young adult students from Kolkata). The sampling method employed was non-probability (Purposive) technique, to make it cost and time effective. The data was collected entirely from the student community, inclusion of professionals and late adulthood approaching persons would have yielded varied results. Further, self-report measures were used to collect data, which may tend to render fake and biased responses. Employing qualitative analysis by using unstructured interviews with the participants would have yielded much in-depth understanding of internet usage pattern and depressive tendencies among the participants.

However, inspite of its limitations, this study has successfully highlighted some interesting facts about difference in internet usage and tendency to feel depressed among young adult males and females of present day society. The study has also revealed existence of significant positive relation between internet usage and depressive tendency, which further explain the cause of engaging in internet/ virtual activities among people suffering from underlying depression. The major strength of this study lies in revealing the fact that males have a significantly higher depressive tendency than females, and hence their internet usage was also found to be higher. This, nevertheless, have thrown light on the negative consequences of social bias related with gender role stereotyping; where males are expected to be less emotionally sensitive/ expressive, discuss their problems openly or seek social support, unlike their female counterparts.

In this sense, the study findings could be effectively utilised in psycho-educational training and therapeutic management purpose for internet overuse problems and experiences of depressive tendencies, particularly in case of males. Moreover, this study could also extend its applicability in social gender role development, child

rearing and parenting practices. Hence, this work might prove to be useful in creating a more balanced and egalitarian socio-cultural model for future generation.

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